

Defense of Marriage Act and caring for our veterans

By Sam Farr

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The Justice Department recently filed a controversial brief in support of the Defense of Marriage Act. How do you feel about this issue?

In short, the brief filed by the Justice Department was outrageous.

First, a little background on the Defense of Marriage Act, known as DOMA. The law has two functions: it allows states to refuse recognition of same-sex marriages performed in other states and it bars same-sex couples from receiving federal benefits.

The latest controversy began when a gay California couple filed a lawsuit against DOMA and the Justice Department weighed in supporting the law. The brief went so far as to compare same-sex marriages to instances of incest and pedophilia. The language was inflammatory, hurtful and plain wrong.

Keep in mind that the Justice Department is required to file briefs in defense of all U.S. laws -- even those the president attacked during his campaign. But there's a lot of leeway on how those defenses are written, and in this case I feel the Justice Department went way over the line.

Work is being done now to draft legislation that would repeal DOMA. Like President Obama, I believe the law is discriminatory and deserves to be overturned. I was one of 67 Representatives who voted against the bill in 1996. It was wrong then and it's wrong now.

In addition, I believe federal benefits should be extended to cover all committed relationships. One of the justifications the Justice Department used to defend DOMA was that denying benefits to same-sex couples saves money for the government. We all must sacrifice during this

economic downturn, but denying basic rights to one group of people is not the way to do it.

I look forward to working with my colleagues to see DOMA repealed. It will be a big step in our journey toward equal rights for all.

What is being done at the federal level to improve the quality and coverage of the government's veteran services?

The last couple years have seen some amazing progress in programs for veterans, and this year will see even more.

It's important to remember that the military presence on the Central Coast is recognized as the foremost concentration of military training available to members of our armed forces. Most of this is based in Monterey County, but there's a big veterans presence here in Santa Cruz County.

The last two years have seen some huge improvements in funding for national veterans programs.

During the 110th Congress, which spanned 2007 and 2008, Congress passed two historic funding bills for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

In 2007, legislation drafted by the Military Construction-VA Appropriations Subcommittee (of which I am a proud member) included the largest increase in funding for veterans programs in the 77-year history of the VA. We followed that with another historic year in 2008, adding \$4.5 billion over the previous year's funding. And we're working to follow that with another banner year in 2009.

We also saw another very important bill for vets signed into law last year, the new GI Bill. The legislation restores four-year college scholarships for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, putting

benefits on the same footing as those offered after World War II.

But Washington isn't the only place seeing action. The work I'm doing in Congress is having a lot of direct benefits here on the Central Coast.

The Joint VA-DOD Clinic, a 100,000-square-foot full-service to be located in Seaside, will serve active and retired military and their families. Having a clinic in Seaside will be a boon for the entire Central Coast and provide an alternative to driving to the VA hospital in Palo Alto.

Another great outreach tool is the new Mobile Veterans Center based in the Santa Cruz Vet Center in Capitola. This vehicle will travel throughout Central California, providing a wide range of services to veterans who can't make it to a VA office. It will be staffed by a social worker, an outreach specialist to assist with VA claims and a counselor.

Another priority is the Fort Ord Veterans Cemetery. The state has submitted its preliminary application to Washington, and planning and design is under way. I'm eager to get this project up and running.

Finally, to all the veterans out there, I'd like to put in a plug for the Veterans History Project. The Library of Congress is sponsoring this great program, an excellent way to add your voice to our nation's history and preserve your stories for future generations.

If you'd like more information about the Veterans History Project or would like to arrange an interview with one of my staff members, please call my Santa Cruz office at 831-429-1976.